

Rabbi Jeremy Master
Yom Kippur 5779-September 19, 2019

Yom Kippur Sermon: Tikkun Olam

In my previous synagogue, through our local Family Promise affiliate, we hosted homeless families for two weeks out of the year. For those two weeks, we would provide food and shelter, basic human necessities, to these families. Over the years as I sat with the families and talked with them about their situations, patterns emerged. Most of the families we housed and fed are single parent households, usually single mothers. These single parents lack education, work minimum wage service jobs, and struggle to improve their economic situation. Many of the families we worked with lived paycheck to paycheck barely scraping by and then something happened like one of them became ill and they were no longer able to live in their housing situation anymore. These families needed our help to survive.

Poverty is an epidemic that Judaism calls on us to fight. In the world, it is estimated that 800 million people experience hunger and 15 million children die each year from malnutrition. In the United States, according to a Department of Agriculture 2005 study, 35.1 million people, including over 12 million children, live in food insecure households and a large percentage of these people are working. Even in Israel, people may not be aware that twenty five percent of

Israelis face hunger and one in three children go to bed without enough to eat. Just try to imagine living on seven dollars an hour and you can understand how working people end up living in houses of worship. We live in the richest country in the world and yet, one out of eight people in the United States faces the possibility of hunger. Today, we are sitting here having made the choice to be hungry, but there are millions of people who do not have that choice, they face hunger involuntarily on a daily basis.

We don't have to sit here just feeling sympathy for their lack of food. Our Jewish values implore us to hear the plight of the hungry and respond to their suffering. Thankfully, the concept of *tzedakah* provides us with a very clear Jewish plan of action for helping the hungry. Although it is often translated as charity, *tzedakah* is not equivalent to charity because the word actually comes from the Hebrew root for justice. In Latin, charity means love. The concept of charity is considered voluntary because it comes from the heart. In contrast, *tzedakah* embodies the idea that Jews are obligated to pursue economic justice. *Tzedakah* is a way of looking at the world and understanding our role in creating a more just society. We must help the weak members of society not because we want to, but because we are required to, since their condition is inherently unjust.

Many of the laws of *tzedakah* are derived from Deuteronomy 15 where verse 4 proclaims, "There should be no needy among you." The Torah is assuring us

that there need be no poverty. There is enough food in the world today to feed everyone. The Torah continues in verses 7 and 8, “If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsmen. Rather, you must open your hand and lend them sufficient for whatever they need.” Jewish tradition has derived several principles of *tzedakah* from this statement.

Firstly, the central Jewish attitude toward the poor is best understood in this passage through the word kinsmen. In Hebrew the word is *achicha*, literally “your brother”. By seeing the poor person as part of our family, it fills our hearts with compassion because we feel close to their suffering. If your brother came to you needing food and shelter, you would not turn him away because he is from your flesh and part of your family and you love him. We are to feel this way about every human being who is in need.

A second principle of *tzedakah* is how much we are to provide for a person. Rabbinic commentators interpret the phrase from Deuteronomy, “Sufficient for whatever they need” to imply that we are required to maintain the person, but not to make them rich. The Torah is not proclaiming some communist scheme to redistribute the world’s wealth. In Judaism, if you earn a lot of money, you should

enjoy it, but we have a sacred responsibility to provide people with what is necessary to maintain them like food, clothing, and shelter.

Finally and most importantly, the laws of *tzedakah* are concerned with a person's sense of self. Deuteronomy says, "do not harden your heart" and "open your hand" to the poor. Think about how low someone who is experiencing hunger must feel. Having talked with people who don't have a place to live, I have seen how this trouble affects their sense of self-worth. For this reason, we are told to provide support with a smile and comforting words. We are to open our hearts to their suffering. Because of this, the great philosopher Maimonides explains that the highest level of *tzedakah* is providing a person with a job so they can support themselves. All of these principles express the feeling that the people experiencing hunger are real human beings who are suffering and need our help. As a result, it doesn't matter how families end up living in a house of worship relying on others for food. It doesn't matter that these are single parents or they didn't achieve financial success for themselves. The only thing that matters is we have an ethical responsibility to help eradicate poverty. Necessities such as food and shelter are a right for all human beings and those of us who can provide these necessities are responsible for helping those who go without.

Referring to our fasting today, in the haftarah, the prophet Isaiah proclaims: "No this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords

of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry; and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, clothe him, never withdrawing yourself from your own kin.” Isaiah is saying that the fast we should be experiencing is to think of the suffering of our fellow person and be compelled to move ourselves to action. The fast we want to experience today is the same fast that Isaiah demands from us. We can’t just sit here praying, we can also share our bread with the 35 million hungry Americans and the 800 million hungry people in the world. We have the ability to provide clothing and shelter for the estimated one million Americans living without adequate housing. We should accept the responsibility we have for our fellow person and take their plight upon ourselves.

Already here at Sinai Temple I have seen the dedication to *tzedakah* with our various High Holy Days social action activities and our ongoing work with Rachel’s Table and Loaves and Fishes. Being involved in helping the most vulnerable in our society is an integral part of my vision as a rabbi. There are so many different ways in which we can help the poor from direct support like bringing food to the food pantry to advocacy for policies that help the poor like bringing in job creating industries or minimum wage increases that help people earn a living wage. I want you to know that I am going to support and advocate for any way in which we can make sure there are no poor among us. We should

engage in all of those different ways to help because the Torah has commanded us to end poverty and that is the religious ideal that we are to strive for.

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Tarfon tells us, “It is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free to avoid it.” We are not going to feed all 800 million hungry people in the world, but we can feed some of those people and to those people, it will mean the difference between life and death. Yom Kippur is our day to contemplate how to turn the vision of ending poverty into a reality. Ultimately, through our fast, we must realize that we are broken, imperfect people who live in a broken, imperfect world and we are commanded to work to heal the suffering and injustice existing in ourselves and in our world. Now, let’s think about what we can do and go out into the world and make a difference.